DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 288 322 EC 200 800

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TITLE Differential Relationships of Parental Perceptions to Maternal and Paternal Involvement in Play with Young High Risk and Handicapped Children.
PUB DATE Apr 87
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development (Baltimore, MD, April 23-26, 1987).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Fathers; Interpersonal Relationship; *Mental Retardation; *Mothers; *Multiple Disabilities; Parent Attitudes; *Parent Child Relationship; Parenting Skills; Parent Participation; Parent Role; *Play; Young Children

ABSTRACT

Twenty-four two-parent families of young multihandicapped children (ages 2-37 months) participated in a study comparing play behaviors of fathers and mothers, as well as the relationship to parental involvement in play of fathers' and mothers' perceptions of (1) the child, (2) the impact of the child on the family, and (3) perceived level of intimate emotional support provided by the spouse. High rates of dyadic play behaviors observed at home and lack of significant overall differences between parent groups supported the notion that fathers and mothers were equally competent in interacting with their children with special needs. Within-family trends suggested that mothers matched verbalizations and directives more nearly to child abilities and interests. Fathers showed higher frequencies of physical involvement in play, but handled children in a gentle style similar to that of mothers. Correlations of parental play and perceptions resulted in minimal associations for mothers, but moderate associations for fathers, perhaps reflecting fathers' more discretionary role in parenting. (JW)

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DIFFERENTIAL RELATIONSHIPS OF PARENTAL PERCEPTIONS TO MATERNAL AND PATERNAL INVOLVEMENT IN PLAY WITH YOUNG HIGH RISK AND HANDICAPPED CHILDREN

BY

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Poster presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, April 24, 1987, Baltimore, MD

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ABSTRACT

THE PURPOSES OF THE STUDY WERE TO COMPARE PLAY BEHAVIOR OF FATHERS AND MOTHERS WITH YOUNG CHILDREN WITH HIGH RISK OR HANDICAPPING CONDITIONS AND TO COMPARE THE RELATIONSHIPS OF PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF (1) THE CHILD, (2) THE IMPACT OF THE CHILD ON THE FAMILY, AND (3) INTIMATE SUPPORT TO PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN PLAY.

TWENTY-FOUR TWO-PARENT FAMILIES PARTICIPATED. THE MAJORITY WERE CAUCASIAN AND OF LOW OR MIDDLE INCOME STATUS. ALMOST ONE THIRD OF THE CHILDREN WERE LBW BABIES AND 70% WERE MULTIPLY HANDICAPPED. CHRONOLOGICAL AGES RANGED FROM 2-37 MONTHS, WITH MOST CHILDREN FUNCTIONING IN THE MODERATE OR PROFOUND RANGES OF RETARDATION.

HIGH RATINGS OF DYADIC PLAY BEHAVIORS OBSERVED AT HOME AND LACK OF SIGNIFICANT OVERALL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN PARENT GROUPS SUPPORTS THE NOTION THAT FATHERS AND MOTHERS WERE EQUALLY COMPETENT IN INTERACTING WITH THEIR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS. WITHIN FAMILY TRENDS ($p < .10$) SUGGESTED THAT MOTHERS MATCHED VERBALIZATIONS AND DIRECTIVES MORE NEARLY TO CHILD ABILITIES AND INTERESTS.

OF SPECIAL INTEREST, GIVEN THE PATERNAL REPUTATION AS A PHYSICALLY AROUSING PLAYMATE (HERZOG, 1985; LAMB, 1981), FATHERS IN THIS STUDY SHOWED HIGHER FREQUENCIES OF PHYSICAL INVOLVEMENT IN PLAY, YET HANDLED CHILDREN IN A GENTLE STYLE SIMILAR TO THAT OF MOTHERS.

CORRELATIONS OF PARENTAL PLAY AND PERCEPTIONS RESULTED IN MINIMAL ASSOCIATIONS FOR MOTHERS, BUT MODERATE ASSOCIATIONS FOR FATHERS, PERHAPS REFLECTING FATHERS' MORE DISCRETIONARY ROLE IN PARENTING.

THESE EXPLORATORY FINDINGS UNDERSCORE THE NEED TO INVESTIGATE FURTHER THE UNIQUE CONTRIBUTIONS OF FATHERS AND MOTHERS TO THE CAREGIVING ENVIRONMENT. THEY ALSO SUPPORT THE INCLUSION OF FATHERS IN HEALTH AND EDUCATION POLICIES AND INTERVENTION SERVICES CONCERNED WITH FAMILIES OF YOUNG CHILDREN WITH HIGH RISK OR HANDICAPPING CONDITIONS.

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INTRODUCTION

ALTHOUGH PATTERNS OF MATERNAL AND PATERNAL PLAY WITH NORMALLY DEVELOPING INFANTS HAVE BEEN DISCUSSED EXTENSIVELY IN THE CHILD DEVELOPMENT LITERATURE, COMPARISONS OF MOTHERS AND FATHERS WITH HIGH RISK OR HANDICAPPED CHILDREN ARE LIMITED (for an exception, see STONEMAN, BRODY AND ABBOTT, 1983). COMPARATIVE STUDIES OF THE CORRELATES OF PARENT-HANDICAPPED CHILD INTERACTION ARE LACKING AS WELL.

THE PRESENT STUDY WAS PART OF A LARGER INTERVENTION STUDY BY THE F.A.M.I.L.I.E.S. PROJECT OF THE CAROLINA INSTITUTE ON EARLY EDUCATION FOR THE HANDICAPPED (CIREEH II) IN COLLABORATION WITH THE NORTH CAROLINA EARLY CHILDHOOD INTERVENTION SERVICES (BAILEY, ET AL., 1986).

THE PURPOSES OF THE STUDY WERE

(1) TO EXPLORE PLAY BEHAVIOR OF FATHERS AND MOTHERS WITH YOUNG CHILDREN WITH HIGH RISK OR HANDICAPPING CONDITIONS AND

(2) TO COMPARE THE RELATIONSHIPS OF PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF (A) THE CHILD, (B) THE IMPACT OF THE CHILD ON THE FAMILY, AND (C) INTIMATE SUPPORT TO PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN PLAY.

SUBJECTS

TWENTY-FOUR TWO-PARENT FAMILIES PARTICIPATED IN THE PRESENT STUDY. THE MAJORITY WERE CAUCASIAN, OF LOW OR MIDDLE INCOME STATUS, AND NEARLY 90% OF MOTHERS AND 80% OF FATHERS HAD COMPLETED HIGH SCHOOL OR MORE EDUCATION.

ALMOST 40% OF THE CHILDREN WERE FIRSTBORNS; 60% WERE FEMALES. APPROXIMATELY ONE THIRD WERE LOW BIRTH WEIGHT BABIES AND 70% WERE MULTIPLY HANDICAPPED. CHRONOLOGICAL AGES RANGED FROM 2-37 MONTHS (MEAN=15 MOS.), WITH MOST CHILDREN FUNCTIONING IN THE MODERATE OR PROFOUND RANGES OF RETARDATION.

THE FAMILIES HAD RECEIVED AN AVERAGE OF 10 MONTHS OF HOME-BASED INTERVENTION SERVICES.

MEASURES

PARENT-CHILD INTERACTION:

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN PLAY. THE PARENT/CAREGIVER INVOLVEMENT SCALE (P/CIS) (FARRAN, KASARI, COMFORT, & JAY, 1986) WAS DESIGNED TO MEASURE PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN FREE PLAY INTERACTION WITH A CHILD BIRTH TO THREE YEARS OF AGE. ELEVEN SPECIFIC PARENTAL BEHAVIORS ARE RATED ON THREE DIMENSIONS: THE AMOUNT, QUALITY, AND APPROPRIATENESS OF EACH BEHAVIOR (see Figures 1-3). BEHAVIORAL ANCHORS ARE DESIGNATED AT ODD INTERVALS ON A 5-POINT RATING SCALE FOR EACH ITEM. THE P/CIS ALSO PROVIDES A GENERAL PROFILE OF PARENTAL INVOLVMENT IN PLAY BY MEANS OF FOUR SUBSCALE SCORES: THE AMOUNT, QUALITY, APPROPRIATENESS, AND OVERALL IMPRESSION OF CAREGIVER BEHAVIOR.

IN THIS STUDY THE P/CIS WAS SCORED AFTER APPROXIMATELY A 20-MINUTE LIVE HOME OBSERVATION OF PARENT-CHILD PLAY BY THE PRIMARY INTERVENTIONIST WORKING WITH EACH FAMILY. MOTHERS AND FATHERS WERE OBSERVED AT SEPARATE VISITS. THE PARENT WAS ASKED TO "PLAY WITH THE CHILD AS S/HE USUALLY DOES", USING WHATEVER ITEMS OR TOYS WERE AVAILABLE WITHIN THE HOME.

INTER-RATER RELIABILITY CONDUCTED WITH AN INDEPENDENT OBSERVER UNFAMILIAR WITH THE FAMILIES IN THE PRESENT STUDY AVERAGED .91 (N=6) ACROSS SUBSCALE SCORES.

PARENTAL PERCEPTIONS:

PERCEPTION OF THE CHILD. THE PARENT'S VIEW OF THE CHILD (PVC) (O'DONNELL & SAMEROFF, 1985), A PROJECTIVE STRATEGY, PURPORTS TO INDEX THE DEGREE TO WHICH THE PARENT PERCEIVES THE CHILD AS A SEPARATE INDIVIDUAL WHO IS INFLUENCED BY AND INFLUENCES THE PARENT. THE PARENT'S WRITTEN PARAGRAPH DESCRIBING THE CHILD IS SCORED ACCORDING TO A HIERARCHICAL CODING SYSTEM DERIVED FROM SAMEROFF'S PIAGETIAN NOTION OF PARENTAL UNDERSTANDING OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT (SAMEROFF & FEIL, 1985) AND BLATT'S ASSESSMENT OF OBJECT RELATIONS THROUGH DESCRIPTIONS OF SIGNIFICANT OTHERS (BLATT, ET AL., 1981). THE SCORING LEVELS (1-5) REPRESENT THE EXTENT TO WHICH EACH PHRASE RELFECTS DIFFERENTIATED AND TRANSACTIONAL PERCEPTIONS OF THE PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP. A MEAN SCORE WAS USED FOR ANALYSES IN THIS STUDY.

IMPACT ON THE FAMILY. THE IMPACT-ON-FAMILY SCALE (IFS) (STEIN & REISSMAN, 1980), A SELF-REPORT QUESTIONNAIRE, WAS CONSTRUCTED TO MEASURE FACTORS SUCH AS FINANCIAL BURDEN, PERSONAL STRAIN, AND FAMILIAL/SOCIAL IMPACT OF LIVING WITH A CHILD WITH SPECIAL NEEDS. THE 33-ITEM TOOL IS ARRANGED ON A 4-POINT SCALE, FROM STRONGLY AGREE (1) TO STRONGLY DISAGREE (4). A TOTAL SCORE WAS USED FOR ANALYSES IN THIS STUDY.

INTIMATE SUPPORT. THE AUTONOMY AND RELATEDNESS INVENTORY (ARI) (SCHAEFER & EDGERTON, 1982), WAS DESIGNED TO ASSESS THE PERCEIVED QUALITY OF INTIMATE EMOTIONAL SUPPORT. THIS 32-ITEM SELF-REPORT QUESTIONNAIRE, WAS COMPLETED BY EACH FATHER AND MOTHER IN REFERENCE TO HIS/HER SPOUSE IN THE STUDY. THE ARI IS FORMATTED ON A 5-POINT SCALE, RANGING FROM NOT LIKE HIM/HER (1) TO VERY MUCH LIKE HIM/HER (5). A TOTAL SCORE WAS USED IN ANALYSES FOR THIS STUDY.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

HIGH RATINGS OF THE OBSERVATIONS OF PARENT-CHILD PLAY INDICATED THAT MOTHERS AND FATHERS ALIKE DEMONSTRATED WARM AND SENSITIVE BEHAVIOR (see Fig.2, P/CIS QUALITY graph) THAT WAS WELL MATCHED TO THEIR CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENTAL NEEDS AND INTERESTS (see Fig. 3, P/CIS APPROPRIATENESS graph). THE OVERALL AFFECTIVE CLIMATE WAS ESPECIALLY POSITIVE (see Fig. 4, P/CIS IMPRESSION graph).

TRENDS IN WITHIN FAMILY PAIRWISE T TESTS OF SPECIFIC BEHAVIORS REVEALED THAT MOTHERS, MORE THAN FATHERS, MATCHED VERBALIZATIONS TO THE CHILD'S COMPREHENSION LEVEL AND ACTIVITIES (see Figs. 2 & 3, P/CIS QUALITY and APPROPRIATENESS graphs). MOTHERS ALSO ISSUED MORE DIRECTIVES ADJUSTED TO THE CHILD'S DEVELOPMENTAL LEVEL (see Fig. 1, P/CIS AMOUNT graph).

OF SPECIAL INTEREST, GIVEN THE PATERNAL REPUTATION AS A PHYSICALLY AROUSING PLAYMATE (HERZOG, 1985; LAMB, 1981), FATHERS EXHIBITED HIGHER FREQUENCIES OF PHYSICAL INVOLVEMENT IN PLAY THAN MOTHERS, YET THEIR HANDLING WAS SIMILAR IN TERMS OF AROUSAL LEVEL AND GENTLENESS (see Fig. 2, P/CIS QUALITY graph), AND SENSITIVITY TO THE CHILD'S NEEDS (see Fig. 3, P/CIS APPROPRIATENESS graph).

THESE FINDINGS SUPPORT AN UNPUBLISHED STUDY OF PARENTS OF PRETERM BABIES (PARKE, 1986) IN TERMS OF THE NATURE OF PHYSICAL INVOLVEMENT, BUT DIFFER WITH RESPECT TO FREQUENCY OF HANDLING. THE RESULTS CONCUR WITH A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF PARENTS OF OLDER CHILDREN WITH DOWN SYNDROME (STONEMAN, BRODY, & ABBOTT, 1983) IN DEMONSTRATING MOTHERS' AND FATHERS' RELATIVELY HIGH RATES OF PHYSICAL CONTACT, CONTROL OF THE PLAY SESSION, AND POSITIVE AFFECT DURING PLAY. HOWEVER, IN CONTRAST TO THE LATTER STUDY, MOTHERS DID NOT EXHIBIT SIGNIFICANTLY HIGHER FREQUENCIES OF TEACHING THAN FATHERS IN THE PRESENT STUDY.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION (CONTINUED)

BIVARIATE CORRELATIONS OF PARENTAL PLAY AND PERCEPTIONS INDICATED MINIMAL ASSOCIATIONS FOR MOTHERS, BUT MODERATE ASSOCIATIONS FOR FATHERS. GIVEN THE SMALL SAMPLE SIZE, IT IS NOT SURPRISING THAT ALL OF THE SUBTLE INFLUENCES OF INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS ON MOTHER-CHILD INTERACTION REPORTED IN THE LITERATURE (CRNIC, ET AL., 1983; DUNST & TRIVETTE, 1986; SIMEONSSON ET AL., 1986; STERN & HILDEBRANDT, 1986) WERE NOT POWERFUL ENOUGH TO EMERGE AS SIGNIFICANT HERE. HOWEVER, IT IS CURIOUS THAT ASSOCIATIONS AMONG PATERNAL FACTORS WERE MARKEDLY STRONGER THAT THOSE OF MOTHERS.

THESE DIFFERENTIAL RELATIONSHIPS ARE CONSISTENT WITH THE COMPARATIVE LITERATURE ON PARENT-CHILD INTERACTION IN FAMILIES WITH NORMALLY DEVELOPING CHILDREN (RUSSELL, 1978; LAMB & ELSTER, 1985). ONE EXPLANATION OFFERED FOR DIVERGENT FINDINGS FOR MOTHERS AND FATHERS IS THE TRADITIONAL EXPECTATION THAT MOTHERS ARE THE PRIMARY CAREGIVERS FOR INFANTS. BECAUSE FATHER'S INVOLVEMENT WITH THE CHILD IS MORE DISCRETIONARY, HIS BEHAVIOR MAY BE MORE SUSCEPTIBLE THAN THAT OF MOTHERS TO THE EFFECTS OF HIS PERCEPTIONS AND RELATIONSHIPS WITH FAMILY MEMBERS (RUSSELL, 1978; LAMB, 1983; PALKOVITZ, 1984). FURTHERMORE, THE POTENTIAL FOR GREATER VARIABILITY IN PATERNAL BEHAVIOR MAY INCREASE THE STATISTICAL LIKELIHOOD OF SIGNIFICANT ASSOCIATIONS BETWEEN FATHERS' PERCEPTIONS AND BEHAVIOR (MCHALE & HUSTON, 1984).

CONCLUSIONS

GIVEN THE EXPLORATORY NATURE OF THIS STUDY AND THE LIMITATIONS OF THE SAMPLE SIZE AND CHARACTERISTICS, THE FOLLOWING CONCLUSIONS ARE TENTATIVE.

1. OVERALL, FATHERS AND MOTHERS WERE EQUALLY COMPETENT IN INTERACTING WITH THEIR YOUNG HIGH RISK OR HANDICAPPED CHILDREN.

2. TRENDS IN WITHIN FAMILY COMPARISONS OF SPECIFIC MATERNAL AND PATERNAL BEHAVIORS SUGGEST THAT MOTHERS' VERBALIZATIONS WERE BETTER MATCHED TO CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE NEEDS AND INTERESTS THAN THOSE OF FATHERS.

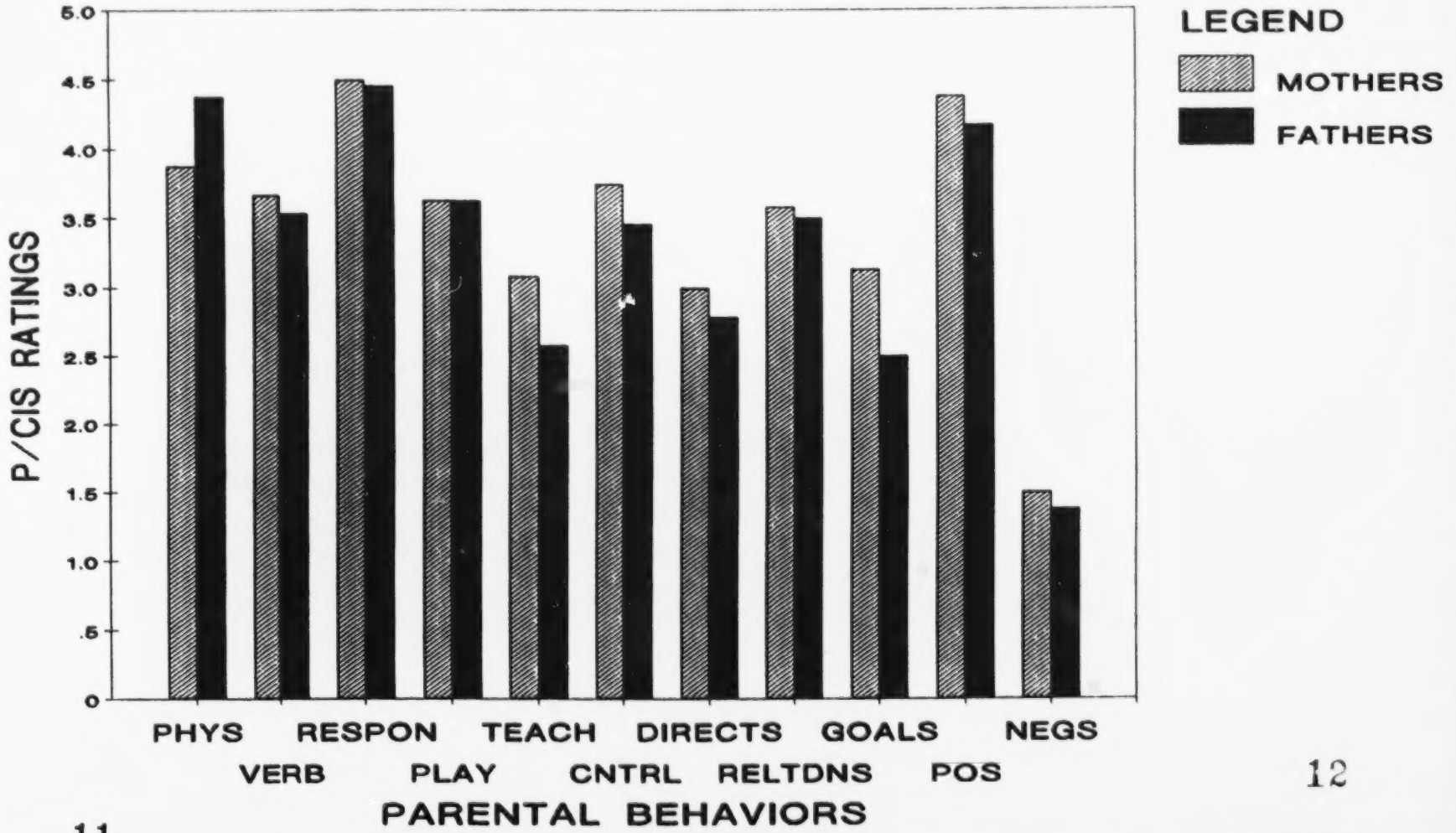
3. THE DIFFERENTIAL RELATIONSHIPS OF PARENTAL PLAY AND PERCEPTIONS FOR MOTHER AND FATHER SUGGEST THE UNIQUE CONTRIBUTIONS THAT EACH PARENT MAY OFFER TO THE CAREGIVING ENVIRONMENT OF A CHILD WITH SPECIAL NEEDS.

4. THE FINDINGS SUPPORT THE NEED FOR FURTHER INVESTIGATION OF THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN MATERNAL AND PATERNAL BEHAVIOR AND PERCEPTIONS IN FAMILIES OF CHILDREN WITH HIGH RISK OR HANDICAPPING CONDITIONS TO CLARIFY INCONSISTENCIES IN THE SPARSE LITERATURE AND TO ESTABLISH A BASE OF EMPIRICAL RESEARCH IN THIS AREA.

5. THE RESULTS OFFER CREDIBILITY FOR STRUCTURING HEALTH AND EDUCATION POLICIES AND INTERVENTION PROGRAMS THAT CONSIDER THE FATHER'S PERSPECTIVE, AS WELL AS THAT OF THE MOTHER IN FACILITATING POSITIVE OUTCOMES FOR FAMILIES WITH YOUNG CHILDREN WITH HIGH RISK OR HANDICAPPING CONDITIONS.

FIGURE 1.

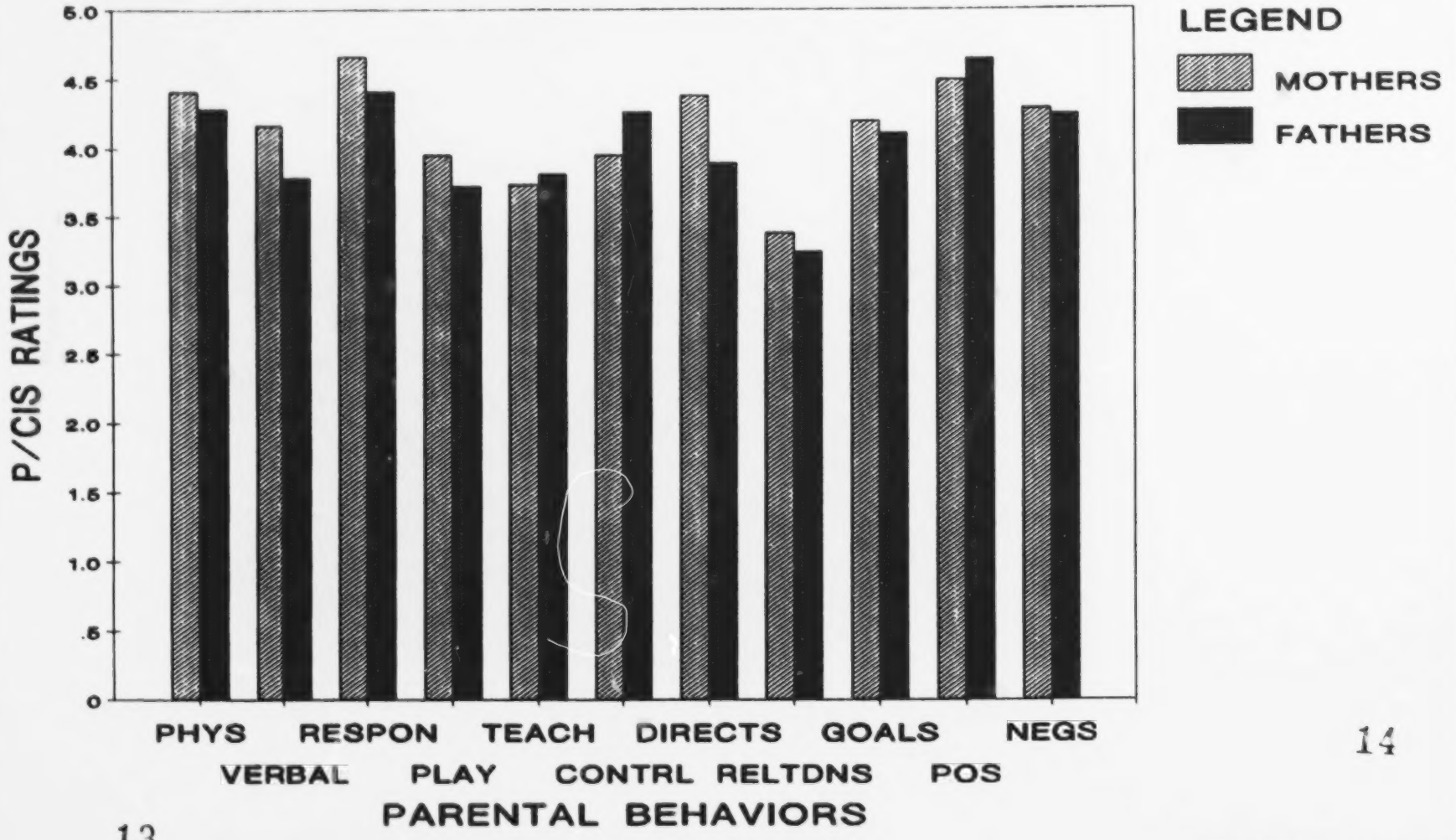
AMOUNT OF INVOLVEMENT IN PLAY FOR MOTHERS AND FATHERS (N=24 FAMILIES)



(COMFORT, 1986)

FIGURE 2.

QUALITY OF INVOLVEMENT IN PLAY FOR MOTHERS AND FATHERS (N=24 FAMILIES)



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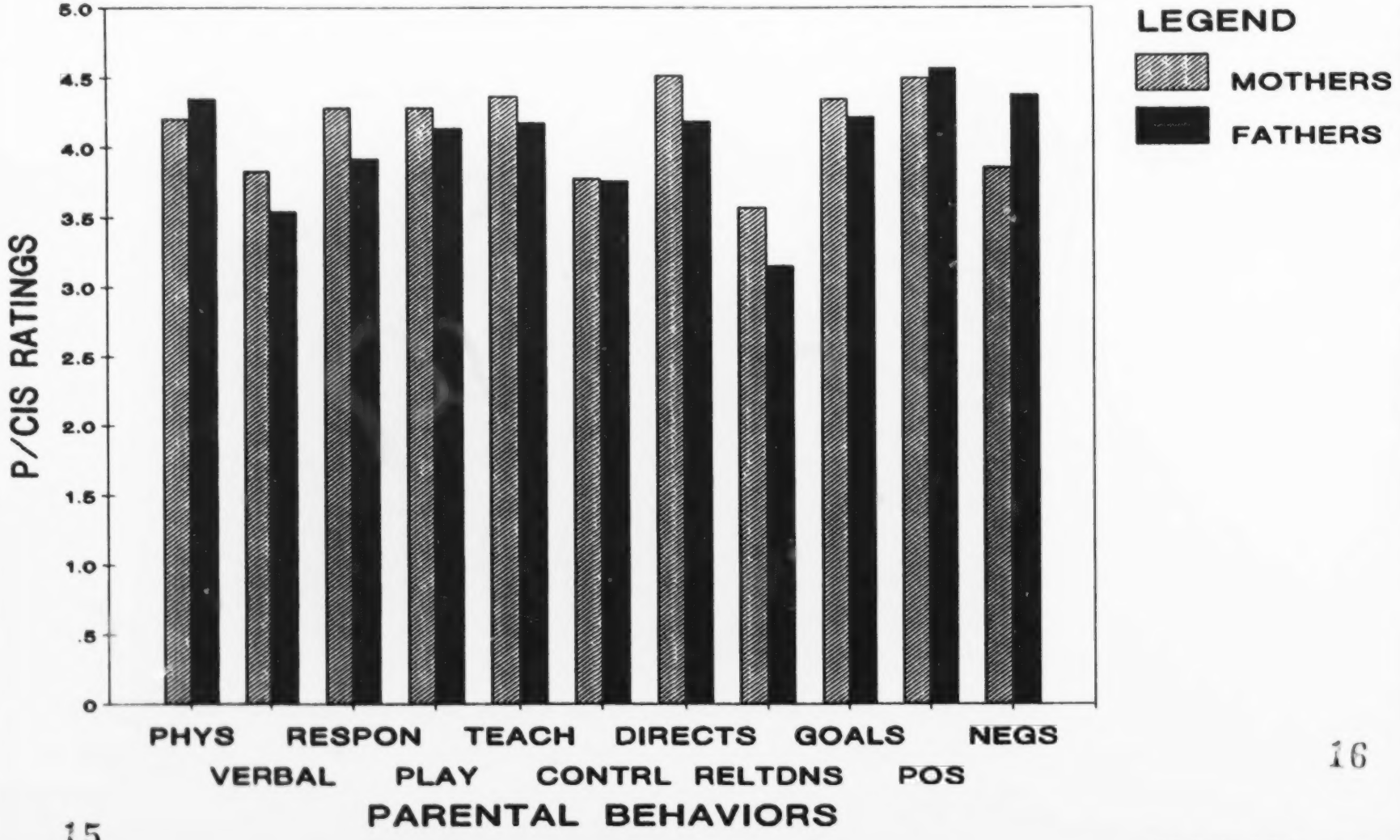
(COMFORT, 1986)

FIGURE 3.

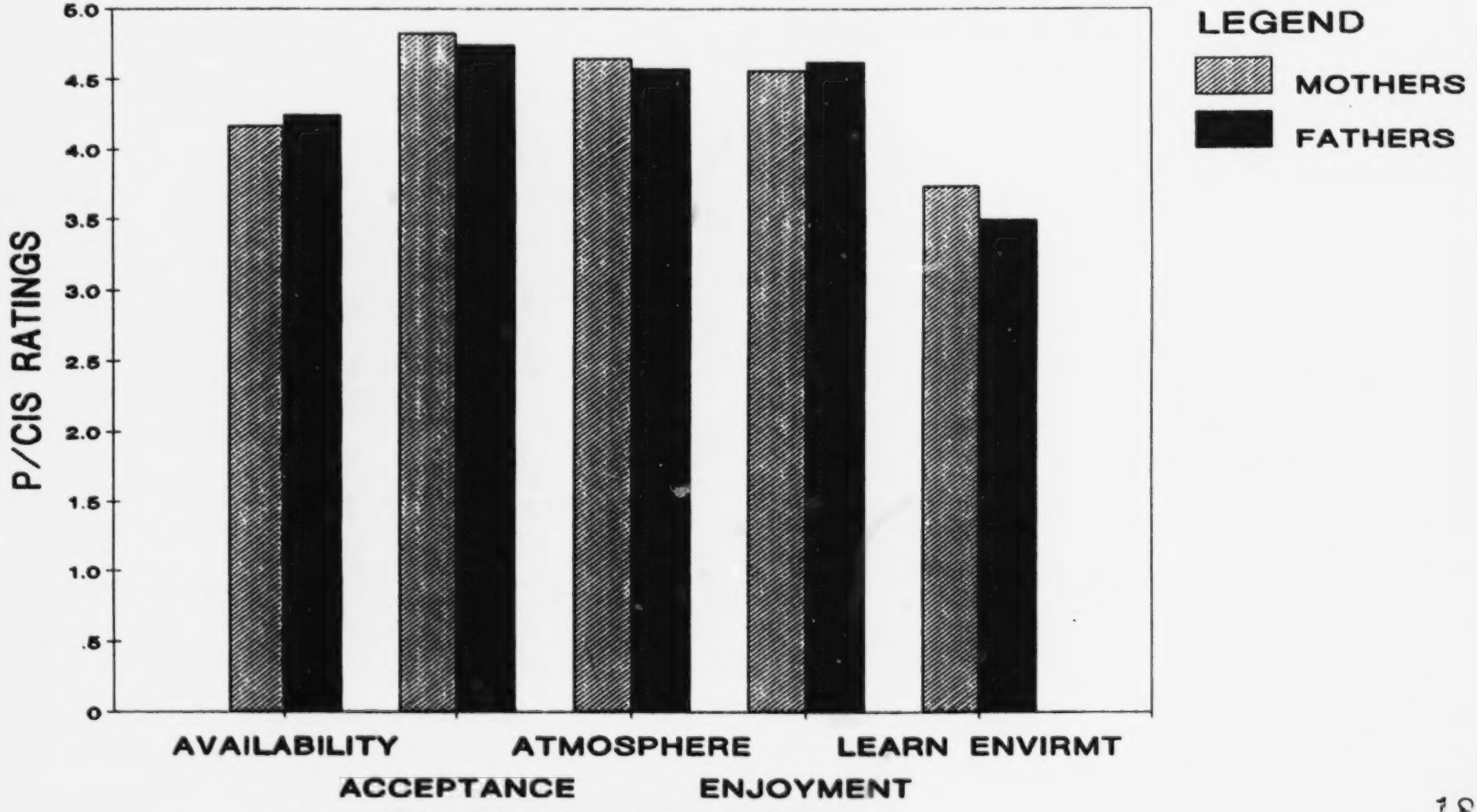
APPROPRIATENESS OF INVOLVEMENT IN PLAY FOR MOTHERS AND FATHERS (N=24 FAMILIES)



(COMFORT, 1988)

FIGURE 4.

IMPRESSION OF INVOLVEMENT IN PLAY FOR MOTHERS AND FATHERS (N=24 FAMILIES)



(COMFORT, 1988)

Table 1
CORRELATIONS OF MATERNAL PLAY AND PERCEPTIONS

	Percept. of Child	Impact on Family	Intimate Support
P/CIS Subscales:			
Amount	-.03	-.21	.05
Quality	.23	.05	.08
Approp.	.17	.05	.12
Impresn.	.05	-.11	.17

Note. No correlations were significant at the .05 level.
Ns = 24, except for Impression correlations for which Ns = 23.

(Comfort, 1986)

Table 2
CORRELATIONS OF PATERNAL PLAY AND PERCEPTIONS

	Percept. of Child	Impact on Family	Intimate Support
P/CIS Subscales:			
Amount	.32	-.19	.36
Quality	.33	-.39	.63**
Approp.	.31	-.31	.60**
Impresn.	.39	-.29	.66**

** $p < .01$
Note. Ns = 24, except for Impression correlations for which Ns = 23.

(Comfort, 1986)